

Matthew 11:7-19

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 November 2018

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Let's go to Matthew chapter 11, 7-19. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Where have you seen that phrase before? You've seen it haven't you in the parables? That's when that phrase comes up normally, isn't it? He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And it is a warning, it is a marker that there's a deeper meaning than what's just going on on the surface. And it's only those who have ears attuned to spiritual reality will get what Jesus is going on about.

And that's what we're going to see this morning, three points. First of all, number one, John was very great. John the Baptist was very great. Now, do you remember last week, verses 1 to 6, John the Baptist is in the doghouse, so to speak.

The crowd have been following Jesus. And suddenly, John the Baptist sends a message from prison, and he's beginning to have doubts, severe doubts about Jesus.

[1 : 06] If you look at verse 3 of Matthew chapter 11, he's been imprisoned for his outspoken preaching, and he sends from his prison to Jesus. Are you the one who was to come, or shall we be looking for another?

In other words, are you really the Messiah? And the question is quite understandable. We saw last week that the Messiah, when he came, was supposed to bring liberty for the captives, and release for the prisoners.

And yet, here is John on death row, languishing in Herod's prison. Where is the victorious, glorious, conquering Messiah? Where is the day of vengeance of our God?

Where is the day of justice? Are you the Messiah, Jesus? Because it doesn't look like that, or should we look for another? And John is in genuine danger of falling away.

Not because of what Jesus was doing, but because of what Jesus was failing to do. Jesus wasn't doing away with Herod, or all the opposition that Israel seemed to be facing.

[2 : 11] And so clearly, the fact that John has sent messengers to Jesus, to ask him, are you really the one, or should we look for another, hasn't done his reputation any good. In the eyes of the crowd.

So verse 7, you'll see that as John's disciples are leaving, Jesus answers them. He begins to speak to the crowd about John. And Jesus asks, doesn't he, a series of rhetorical questions.

He says, in verse 7, what did you go out into the desert to see? When you went out to see John the Baptist, did you go out to see a reed, a blade of grass swayed by the wind?

In other words, why did you take all that trouble to go and hear him? You and your family, to go out into that inhospitable wilderness, in the searing heat, was it just to hear a weak and pliable person who's like a reed in the wind?

Blown about by every popular opinion. Bending to every passing fashion. Because people had begun to say that about John the Baptist, didn't they? Because of his doubts about Jesus.

[3 : 16] But the answer is self-evidently no. Of course, you didn't go and hear a preacher that is like that. They were two a penny in Jerusalem, just like they're two a penny in London today.

You don't have to go into the wilderness to see a preacher that will tell you what you want. What then did you go out to see? Jesus asked, did you go out to see a man dressed in fine clothes?

Literally, a man wearing soft clothes.

What was called in school, in my school, a softie. As somebody who didn't like physical discomfort.

You know the kid in school, who was permanently off games. Who always had an injury.

Who forgot his sports kit at every opportunity. Who in September wore clothes, gloves, a hat, a scarf, a softie. Is that the person that you went to see? Of course not.

But people were saying John had gone soft in his conviction. He couldn't stand the heat. Of course, they didn't go out into the desert to see a softie. They could have popped down the road, couldn't they, to Herod's palace and seen that.

[4 : 18] That's what Jesus says. No, it's those who are in the palace. Who wear fine clothes. It's clearly a dig at Herod. Well then, what did you go out into the wilderness to see?

And they went out to see verse 9, a prophet. Since Malachi, there has been 400 years of silence. 400 years the voice of prophecy has not been heard.

God's voice had not been heard. And so God's people had not heard. They had within them an aching hunger for some sort of spiritual reality.

And then one day they heard that as Isaiah had prophesied, there was a voice calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make room. Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand, it's coming, it's near.

And that is why people went into the wilderness, to see a prophet, to see a man speak from God. The first prophet for 400 years. And you can imagine the sense of excitement that God was doing something new out in the wilderness.

[5 : 22] A prophet like Elijah. And so out the people go, in their hundreds and thousands to see him. And so Jesus is saying that despite John's doubts, he really was a true prophet.

He goes further than that. He says, John wasn't just a prophet. In a long line of Old Testament prophets, he was far more than a prophet. Far more than a prophet because he was the only prophet to be prophesied about.

They said he'd come before he did. So if you look at verse 10. Behold, this is the one of whom it is written. Behold, I will send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. In other words, John is the messenger prepared by Malachi. Prophesied by Malachi. Malachi is the last book of the Bible. It's the book in your Bible before the Gospel of Matthew.

And Malachi chapter 2 and verse 1. This is the prophet who was to come before the Messiah. And in verse 14 of that chapter, he is the Elijah. It's another reference to the prophet Malachi.

[6 : 31] Who said that before the Son of God comes, before the Messiah comes, Elijah would come to prepare the way. But he's also more than a prophet, isn't he?

Because he's the final Old Testament prophet at the verse 13. For all the prophets in the law prophesied until John. After John, no more prophets. He is more than a prophet because he's prophesied about.

But he is the last prophet. But even more than that, he is more than a prophet because of his message. What did the Old Testament prophets speak about? They spoke about the end of the exile.

They spoke about the end of the land of Israel. They spoke about Babylon. They spoke about a return to the land. But John's message is very different. John didn't just speak about return from exile.

He spoke about the very coming of God to his people. Turn back to Matthew chapter 3 and verse 11. Let's hear John preach this morning. John says, I baptize you with water.

[7 : 39] Chapter 3 and verse 11. For repentance. But he who is coming after me is mightier than I. His sandals I'm not worthy to carry. I'm not even worthy to tie up his shoelaces.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. And he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. In other words, John is prophesying about the coming of God to his people.

And when John saw Jesus walking towards him in Galilee, what did he say? He said, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I've been talking about.

Now in Matthew chapter 11 at the start, John may have been confused about the way that Jesus was carrying out his ministry. But be in no doubt, as to John's importance.

John the Baptist was the greatest. He wasn't fickle. He wasn't a softy. He was the greatest prophet ever. And what is Jesus doing here? Is he simply talking about John?

[8 : 45] Is he simply rehabilitating John the Baptist? Rehabilitating is flagging reputation. Well, if we have ears to hear, Jesus is saying much more than this.

Jesus is showing you and I this morning. John the Baptist is true significance. And is important in the whole of history of the salvation of the world. Because John's unique role was to point to Jesus who ushers in the kingdom.

John, if you like, is on the hinge of history of the universe. And that's why he's so important. Let's try and apply this. Look at verse 14 of Matthew chapter 11.

He says to the crowd, are you willing to accept? Are you willing to accept who John is? That he really is the prophet who prepares the way for the Messiah.

Do you believe that? And so it's a question for you this morning. Do you believe it? Do you believe that John really is the final prophet of Judaism?

[9 : 53] And from now on, Jesus is God's final word to his world. That's the point Jesus is making here.

The importance of John the Baptist is not for John's own sake. But because of who Jesus is. So what about that claim?

Well, God's grace and God's kindness can come to us from all sorts of world religions. Do you hear that? There's a bit of God in all more. It's very popular. Many people believe that.

That God operates in all sorts of ways. But Jesus' insistence that John is the final prophet shows that God's grace operates only through him and him alone.

Yes, all the prophets prophesied until John. But now, well, who comes after John? The Messiah Jesus. And he is God's last word to his world.

[10 : 51] And when people say that we Christians are too exclusive, well, we are being no more exclusive than Jesus is. The whole of the Old Testament leads up to the coming of God into his world.

And John the Baptist is the prophet who ushers God incarnate into the world. He says make way. He says prepare the place. Because God is coming.

And so the question is, do you accept John's greatness? And that's a very important question.

Because it really is saying, do you believe who Jesus is? Because if you believe that John the Baptist was a prophet, ushering a way for God to come to his universe, into the world, well then you believe who Jesus is.

But there's a staggering consequence to this. And that is the second point. John the Baptist was great. But secondly, Christians are even greater. Remember verse 11. Truly I say to you, among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

And yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And so John the Baptist is languaging in a prison cell in Herod's fortress on the shores of the Dead Sea. He is, Jesus says, the greatest person to have lived.

[12 : 14] But from now on, people who are members of Jesus' kingdom are even greater. Not because you're bolder, you're not. Who could be more bold than John?

Not because you are stronger in your faith. We've all doubted like he did. But because in Jesus, that old order, the Old Testament era has ended.

And now the new order has begun. And that means that members of Jesus' kingdom, no matter how weak and how humble they feel, are infinitely more privileged than John the Baptist.

Because we are sons and daughters of the kingdom. Sons and daughters of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. We are far more privileged. Even at the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets.

And so if you are a Christian here this morning, if you are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, a member of his church, do you realise how privileged you are? Do you realise that you are more privileged even than John the Baptist?

[13 : 24] Because you are members of his kingdom. And if you do, well there are all sorts of consequences to that this morning. If you realise how privileged you are, you will lay everything down. You will lay everything down that compromises commitment to Jesus' kingdom.

And so you will make it your supreme goal to serve this king and this kingdom. And you will submit everything under his lordship.

Your ambition. Your career. Your money. Your possessions. Your family. Your sexuality.

Your dreams. Do you see what it means to acknowledge who John the Baptist is and who Jesus is? In Jesus' day there was no one greater than John the Baptist.

But you, weak and feeble though you may feel, are greater. You are highly privileged. If you are a member of the kingdom of heaven. But be warned.

[14 : 31] Because with great privileges comes great opposition. Christians. Christians. Christians. Members of the kingdom. Members of Christ's church will like John the Baptist be opposed.

Look at verse 12. Look at verse 12. Verse 12. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violence.

Violence take it by force. This is one of the most disputed verses in the New Testament. Let me make a prophecy. My prophecy is that PhDs will be written on this verse until the end of time.

And I'm not claiming to give you a definitive interpretation. But I do think the overall thrust of the verse is very clear. What Jesus is saying is that from the time of John the Baptist when he lived on earth the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing.

We've seen that in the ministry of Jesus. It's grown. But along with that forceful advance comes forceful opposition. So these forceful men in verse 12 are violent men.

[15:41] Who have been opposing the kingdom. And we see that because John the Baptist is now in prison. He's about to have his head chopped off on the wing of a dancing girl who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And that sort of opposition is going to be commonplace. Commonplace. It will be normal as the kingdom of heaven advances. So it will be forcefully opposed. And it's just the same today. As the kingdom advances around the world and in certain places around this world the kingdom of God is advancing in great leaps and bounds. So the subjects of the kingdom of God are being greatly opposed.

Let me give you some international examples. This is from Evangelicals Now this month. I just circled four things. First of all in India at least ten pastors were arrested with their family members on the 23rd of September.

Where they participated in a church service across the state of Uttar Pradesh. Again in India. A 16 year old Christian and three others in eastern India have been in jail for more than a month on a baseless rape charge.

[16:51] One relative of that church said that village leaders had long persecuted Christians and pressured police to file charges against Peter Ram. Al-Shabaab Tarahis murdered two Kenyan Christians traveling on a bus on the 14th of September after they refused to recite the Shahada Islamic Creed.

In Pakistan the only Christian family in their area were beaten and saw their house set on fire on the 20th of September and told they would be killed if they returned to it.

And so since the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing on every front. But in every case being forcefully opposed forceful men laying hold of it.

And so my question to you and to myself is have you discovered this sort of opposition? Because if you are a true subject of the kingdom of heaven you soon will.

It will be far more subtle and far more British. But there will be opposition. Some of you know what that is like in your office.

[18:09] Some of you will know what that is like in your school and you are afraid of it. Christians have great privileges but they will also face great opposition. And so let me say to you if you are here this morning and you are not yet a Christian.

Can I say to you don't join us. Unless you are prepared for that sort of opposition. Opposition from enemies outside and Satan and temptation from within.

And let me warn you. There is a form of Christianity in this country. Christianity that goes by the name of Christianity that is not willing to have opposition.

And it is not willing to say things that will face opposition. And I want to say to you that is not Christianity. And be warned by it.

And don't fall for it. Because it is so, so alluring. Jesus says to the crowd. John was great. You Christians are even greater.

[19:19] But the third and most final thing. The most startling thing to this crowd is that you are unlikely to believe. And that is an extraordinary thing. You are unlikely to believe. Here he is saying to this crowd.

Just having said how great it is to be part of this kingdom. And then he says but you will never believe it. And so. Child comes to your house this afternoon.

Or you see. You are at a house where there is a group of children. And one child says to the other. Do you want to play outside? And the other child stamps his foot and says.

No I don't want to. Child then says. Well do you want to play up in my room? Sulking arms. Crossed.

And a pouch. No I don't want to play. Child says. Well do you want to go to the park? Child stamps his feet.

[20 : 22] Throws down what's in his arms. And says. I don't want to play with you. Makes for a very awkward afternoon. Doesn't it? Well little changes in 2000 years. Look at verse 16.

Jesus says to them. What should I compare you to this generation? You are like children. Sitting in the marketplace. And calling to your playmates. We played the flute for you. You didn't dance. We sang a dirge for you. And you didn't mourn. You have to understand. Instead of playing doctors and nurses. Instead of playing teachers and pupils. Instead of playing mums and dads. In Jesus' day. Children played weddings and funerals. That's the point of the verse. And weddings and funerals. Were much much more colourful. Than they are in 21st century Britain. At a wedding. And it's true of a Jewish wedding today. Is that the guests sing. And they dance. They sing in the synagogue. As well as the reception. They are tremendously colourful affairs. And on a funeral. They are equally colourful.

[21 : 23] Whales and shrieks. And if there's not an appropriate level of lamentation. You hire mourners in. To come and get the mourning really going. We see it don't we.

Sometimes after there's been terrorist attacks. And we see people on the TV. And great noisy lamenting and mourning. And you can see can't you. How then weddings and funerals. Would have become really popular children's games. And if the game is wedding. Well the child is playing the flute. But the others refuse to dance. They refuse to join in. And if the game is funerals. Well the child begins to grieve. And mourn and wail. And yet the others refuse to join in. And Jesus says. That's just like the generation I'm talking to. He says you're just like. Balshy children that won't join in with the game. When it comes to spiritual matters. You just won't join in. Whatever the game is.

[22 : 22] Just look at your response to John. And your response to John is verse 18. Well John came neither eating nor drinking. And they say he's got a demon. And then you say the son of man came. That's referring to himself.

Eating and drinking. And they say look at him a glutton and a drunkard. A friend of tax collectors and sinners. What's the picture? John's ministry was a bit more like a funeral. And to hear John the Baptist preach was a stern thing. A stern man of the wilderness. He didn't eat normal food. He didn't drink normal drink. He prepared a diet of locusts and honey. And he called people to mourn over their sins.

To recognise their spiritual state. And repent and turn away. And make room for the kingdom of God. And most people wouldn't play. They wrote him off as demon possessed. And then Jesus comes. And his ministry is really different. It's more like a game of weddings. Indeed Jesus describes himself. Doesn't he? As the bridegroom. And Jesus was often seen at parties.

[23 : 24] And he would eat with anyone. Tax collectors. State officials. Rich and poor. The religious and the prostitute. But the crowds didn't like his ministry any more than they liked John's. They said that Jesus is a glutton and a drunk.

But he never got drunk. Do you see? Whatever aspect of the gospel it is. Whether it is calling sinners to repentance.

To turn around and change like John did. Or if it is showing God's wide and loving and gracious mercy for humanity like Jesus did. Most people will not like it.

And I want to say to you that is incredibly contemporary. If you've been a Christian for any length of time you will have seen exactly that same response.

Some people reject Christianity because it's too grim and it's too judgmental. People are furious aren't they? When they understand. Are you saying that if I don't become a Christian that God will send me to hell?

[24 : 26] How can you believe in a God like that? A God who makes people just to consign them to hell. That is dangerous. Of course the answer to that is God is not immoral.

And God is not unjust. God is living. God has provided a way from which you can be rescued from hell if you will repent. But people don't accept the message of repentance.

The sort of message represented by John the Baptist. But others reject Christianity because it's too welcoming of sinners isn't it? It's too arrogant. It's too simplistic. It's dumb.

To say that God will just forgive people like that. And they hate the simple message of Jesus' love for sinners and outcasts like ourselves. And it wouldn't matter who God sent to some people. They would still reject him. But notice we close Jesus' intriguing riddle. Look at verse 19. Look, you reject John.

[25 : 34] You reject me. Yet wisdom is justified. Is proved right. By her actions. By her deeds. What's that mean?

Funny way to end it, isn't it? Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. Wisdom is proved right by her actions. You see the fact that most people reject the Lord Jesus.

And most people reject John the Baptist. Doesn't prove anything. About the truth or importance of the gospel. And this is so helpful to us.

God's gospel is not proved right or wrong by opinion powers. God's gospel is not proved right or wrong by focus groups. By popular opinion.

But by her actions. Literally by her works. Well what are the works that prove Jesus to be in the right and unbelievers to be in the wrong? Look at verse 4. When Jesus is on earth.

[26 : 34] Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the poor of the good news preach to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended because of me.

And they are the works that prove that Jesus to be the Christ. And if we refuse to accept them. It says far more about our childish stupidity. Like the children in the marketplace.

Than it does about Jesus. So let me finish. As I began. Because the message is really summed up in verse 15. Isn't it?

To the world and to you. He who has ears to hear. Let him hear.